Staircase

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the intensity of maritime traffic was considerably reduced and the Tower began to lose the leading role it had had as aid to navigation to become a mere watchtower or a vantage point from which the Gulf of Artabro was dominated. The great fleets that in days gone by had sailed the coasts of Gallaecia on their way to Britannia disappeared and with them the light of the lighthouse burned away, plunging the profiles of the cliffs of the north-western into darkness.

It was a time of oblivion and abandonment, during which the lighthouse gradually and seriously deteriorated and the outer ramp around the central core for access to the beacon as well as the four outside facades that protected it collapsed. The gales, saltpeter and rain that batter this area during winter storms must have gradually undermined wall mortars, but also human intervention proved determinant as during this time the Tower became the quarry for the city and its ashlars were taken away one by one by the locals to be reused in the construction of the new buildings that were then being made in the city.

The destruction of the ascending helicoidal ramp around the outside of the Tower of Hercules, of which there were hardly remains by the 14th century, meant the disappearance of the only access to the upper section of the building and the different chambers inside.

When the Tower recovered its function as aid to navigation, it was necessary to design a system to gain access to the top section to fuel the lighthouse. The solution taken was the construction of an inner staircase that connected the base of the Tower with the lantern, although this meant cutting through some of the domes from Roman times.
This staircase was initially made of wood and its structure was very simple. In 1684, the duke of Ucea, in his capacity as the general-in-chief of Galicia, commissioned its reconstruction to master builder Amaro Antúnez, a stonecutter from a family with a long history in the trade. He hailed from Santiago de Compostela and had moved to A Coruña by the mid 17th century to participate in the reparation of the defences of the city, specifically the mined turret in the vicinity of the current Puerta Real.

Antúnez's new design of the staircase forced to sacrifice one of the four chambers at each of the Tower's floors to build the flights of stairs. But so as not to undermine the structure of the building and prevent endangering its stability the decision was made that ramps changed chamber at each floor. This way, at the ground floor level the staircase began at the north-eastern chamber and went up to the rotunda through the southeast chamber on the second floor.

In 1790, during Eustaquio Giannini's refurbishment, Antúnez's staircase was in very poor condition and was substituted by one made of stone with a wooden banister. It followed the pattern of the previous one but some modifications were necessary. To ensure the stability of the work, it was necessary to inlay the ashlars of the steps into the Roman walls and engage them firmly. Eustaquio Giannini came up with a procedure to document his intervention and leave a record of his intervention on the Roman stonework. It consisted in introducing some black stones, probably shale, that can be easily identified as we climb the stairs.

In 1905, engineer Salvador López Miño, in his capacity as the head of Public Works of A Coruña, replaced the banister by one made of stone with a carved parapet to make it safer and more in keeping with the tastes of the time.

Finally in 1991, as a result of the restoration of the monument promoted by the Ministry of Public Works and under the direction of Pablo Latorre González-Moro, that banister was replaced by the current one, made of bronze.

Access to the monument from the promenade is through a pedestrian lane that climbs the hillock on the peninsula of the Tower and leads up to the base of the double imperial staircase that leads directly to the platform. This lane is the old road used to take the firewood, oil or coal to the lighthouse's lantern; the same that in 1865 architect Faustino Domínguez Romay stretched up to Campo de la Estrada, thus turning it into a promenade for the enjoyment of the locals.

With the occasion of the bicentennarial of the rebuilding of the Tower of Hercules (1970-1990), the Spanish Ministry of Public Works and Urbanism and the City Council of A Coruña signed an agreement to restore the site and improve the surrounding area. The project was very ambitious as it made it possible to assessment of the lighthouse and study the ills of the building as well as to improve the electrical installation and replace the metallic carpentry of the windows for safety glass and iron elements for bronze ones. Besides, the commemorative plaques of the 18th century reform on the Tower's gates were restored and internationally renowned Galician sculptor Francisco Leiro was commissioned the making of gates with relieves alluding to the history and legends around this monument. It was also then when the cleaning of the Tower's platform was conducted, the buildings spoiling its image were removed and a wide area at the foot of the lighthouse was excavated. The importance of the finds justified the musealization of the remains so that anyone visiting the Tower could see them. In the platform itself, a small museum-building was constructed that disguised the escarp that leads to the excavation and is used

as the underground entrance to the monument through an old tunnel lighthouse keepers began to use in 1956 to enter the lighthouse from the houses that were at the foot of the monument.

With the occasion of the candidacy of the Tower to the World Heritage List, the Port Authority commissioned Juan Manuel Doce Porto & Dulcemaría Trigo Cousillas architect studio a number of works on the monument that have contributed to its better conservation. They consisted in the improvement of the washroom area where architectural barriers were removed; improvements to the lighting system in the excavation area and chambers; the removal of damp from the platform of the Tower and the balcony and of condensation caused by current carpentry. Furthermore, the mortars of all four facades of the Tower were restored, which forced to scaffold the lighthouse between October –May 2009.

Furthermore, the City Council promoted a project for the improvement of the musealization of the area based on explanatory panels and the construction of a Visitor's Welcome Centre that was built on the open area of the car park at the foot of the Tower. The project was designed by Juan Manuel Doce Porto and Dulcemaría Trigo Cousillas' architectural studio.